THE MAGIC IN PAINTING

By Robert L. Pincus

The death of painting, like that of God, has been prophesied again and again. But both have defied this pessimistic prognosis. There is also a vital bond between the realms of painting and spirituality: Both involve magical thinking.

Still, in a predominantly secular age, painting has an advantage: the magic is located in a physical form. The magic is visible.

Think for a moment about the most basic notions of what constitutes a painting, the way that small or large strokes of color on canvas or panel become a landscape, a person or an arrangement of objects. Of course, they never really become these things, but we're perfectly willing to believe that a flower or face resides in a painting. We embrace the illusion. Or, we're willing to look at a painting that contains no image at all, searching for the poetry or mood in purely geometric forms. If that isn't magical thinking, then what is?

"Pure Painting 3" is the kind of exhibition where you can immerse yourself in this line of thought; and it manifests itself in persuasive ways.

The entry points in this show of fourteen San Diego artists are many. Take the rooms that Kathleen E. Marshall pictures in her gouaches, works which are informed by a plethora of painters, from Dutch and Spanish masters of the still life to late nineteenth century French artists like Edouard Vuillard. She renders them with exquisite attention to detail. And though they are reduced to a very small scale, slightly larger than miniatures, they beckon us to enter them in our mind's eye.

You notice the ripples in the striped canvas chair of *Palazzo Marigliano 39 Via San Biagio dei Librai – Naples* in a way that you almost surely never would – if you weren't fixing your gaze on them in a painting. Objects, like rooms, take on a highly subtle metaphysical quality, as in Marshall's still lifes of turnips, eggplant, and figs. The real becomes super-real. Even as Marshall's images shrink the observable world, they magnify its appeal. They make us more acutely aware of its beauty.

To reduce the scale of familiar things is to make them look more magical. Even more than Marshall, Marianela de la Hoz puts emphasis on this idea. In fact, she fuses this notion with one other: the world as a surreal theater.

The young woman in de la Hoz's *I Am Going to Devote Myself to Being a Saint* hides her face behind a painting, which, presumably, depicts the same face as the one she is concealing. It's logical to think so, since the woman in the picture holds up the picture within the picture in the exact position where her face would be located.

This painting, then, becomes a marvelous little house of mirrors. The implication is that the framed picture of the face is art and the surrounding scene is real. But of course, this is just another illusion.

In both of these artists, you might say the magic is rooted in the seamlessness of the image. Neither artist draws your attention to the craft of the picture nor how it is constructed.

On a larger scale, Jesse Mockrin does the same with her life-size portraits. Like de la Hoz, she creates visual theater. And, also, like de la Hoz, she imbues her paintings with a palpable emotional tension. It's embedded in the curious pose of the woman in *young professional (caroline)*. Her face is oddly stern and her arms stiff. It's as if she's uncomfortable in her own skin, which is just as true of *young professional (phillip)*. They appear wary and guarded, cutting against cheerier and more conventional depictions of the successful young professional. These are uneasy portraits for uneasy times.

Mockrin's paintings can also be seen as companion pieces to Vicki Walsh's portraits in the context of this exhibition. But the angst in Mockrin's portraits is restrained, while in Walsh's faces it arrives like a sock to the jaw. The faces are contorted, mouths agape and eyes bulging in all five of the paintings in her "Fear" series. The expressions are so extreme that they seem almost darkly comic.

Their modernist prototype is Edvard Munch's "scream" paintings and prints. But it's equally important to know that in technique and style, they diverge dramatically from this source. As a counterpoint to the raw expression of emotion – accentuated by the blood-red orbs that float across her picture surfaces – Walsh

offers polished surfaces, oils painstakingly applied in layers that create a sensuous version of skin and a gorgeous picture surface.

In the way our society consumes images in digital form or as printed reproductions, what is lost is the way that a reproduction of a painting and the painting itself are two very different experiences. Walsh's paintings are a forceful case in point. Seeing the image in reproduction you can only register the emotion and palette of the pictures. Standing in front of them, the other dimension of their surfaces becomes evident; you feel the pleasure of the way she uses oil on wood panels. This is part of their power, part of what brings the faces to life.

Clearly one of library curator Mark-Elliott Lugo's aims in putting together "Pure Painting 3" is to highlight what it is that makes paintings a singular kind of experience. And for him, as the number in the title indicates, this is the third in an ongoing series of exhibitions dedicated to this premise.

By making the craft of painting his theme, Lugo can include an eclectic range of examples. And this allows us to see connections that might not be obvious. Walsh's paintings, with their intense scrutiny of faces, might seem a world apart from Robert Treat's coolly composed abstractions, with their emphasis on lines that suggest fragmented vessels. But there is a decisive connection between them, in the lushness of surface their paintings share.

Treat has mastered the difficult medium of encaustic. He uses its shimmering, textured quality, along with its semi-translucence, to create compositions that possess a graceful interplay between fully defined lines and ghostly ones that appear as if they are floating in a pale atmospheric surface.

Both Walsh and Treat accentuate the power of medium in painting, while other painters in this exhibition make us more even acutely aware of it. Jeanne Dunn's *French Trenches #3* is entrancing in its use of distinct brushstrokes as the building blocks of a landscape that is both seductive and unsettling. Its many elements are beautifully calibrated: dark, foreboding vegetation in the foreground and a ravine that guides the eye through the canvas to hazy figures of a man and dog in the distance. The landscape appears almost fluid in the way one color segues into

another and one brushstroke into another. Yet the entire image is cogent and unified.

Dunn's title also adds an element of mystery, too. Why the word "trench"? As bucolic as her picture appears, was this a military trench in the previous century?

Her painting is painterly too, in an exemplary way – meaning that the forms within it are defined by paint, fluidly handled, rather than by distinct line. So, too, are Dan Adams' pictures. *Dog in Field* demonstrates the artist at his best, defining the upper portion of the dog with a thick, sensuous passage of pale paint. The lower portion is dark. The expanse of painted panel around the dog is just as deftly worked, rife with active brushwork.

In formal terms, the title offers a wry double entendre. This depiction of a dog exists in a field (open ground) and in a field of paint (a flat expanse of color.) And in that wonderfully mysterious way in which our perception of a painting defies any literal description, Adams' small strokes of paint are as convincing as any tightly rendered version of a dog.

Other selections in this exhibition remind us why ambiguity and complexity in images of forms are vital dimensions of the art of painting. Stephen P. Curry turns perception on its head in *Constellation #20*, one in a series of works. In this painting, small, brightly colored shapes represent fragments of sky and broad, cream-colored expanses of negative space imply foliage. You piece the image together, with some difficulty, in your mind's eye. The title of the painting also points to the inadvertent image created along the way: the tiny slivers of sky loosely evoke a pattern of stars.

Marsha Boston offers up organic looking shapes, often defined by soft black lines. They surface in lightly colored surfaces. A catalyst for them is her interest in botany and biology, as well as a passion for herbalist knowledge of California Indians. But in the process of making painting, knowledge gives way to purely visual forms.

Removing images or reducing them to diagrammatic form, as both Treat and Boston have done, creates its own kind of mystery by eliminating discernible signs of the world itself. Yet even the most distinct imagery can appear utterly mysterious. This aesthetic of the psychologically disorienting image is rooted in the

likes of fifteenth century Netherlandish painter Hieronymus Bosch and gathered significant momentum with seminal, early twentieth century Surrealists such as Salvador Dali and René Magritte.

Jen Trute has adopted and adapted this approach to her own provocative and poetic ends – and done so with stylistic flair. She is the Surrealist as social critic, with commentary offered in the form of dark hallucinations about the future. The environment in *All for Baby* is so poisoned that no human infant survives. There is only a baby doll with a slim, blonde doll for a mother. The artificial baby girl is deformed, sprouting horns on the top of her head. The cat on her bed is shriveled. Mutated creatures, as well, dangle from the mobile above her head. Everything is precisely rendered and bizarrely plausible, according to the logic of the picture. Black magic has replaced reason in the universe of Trute's paintings.

Her other painting in this show, *Coral*, is just as creepy, but more gothic. A seated woman, elegantly costumed, is calm, but she is a sickly gray, like much of her surroundings. A few fish are more sharply defined, but most things, including a coral reef and the steel wall of a ship, are just as wan as her. The female figure seems to be a metaphor for the unsettling lifelessness of the scene that surrounds her. You don't have to know that this picture is part of a series addressing environmental threats to the oceans to sense its ominous tone.

Trute's images translate well in reproduction. Still, they have an additional power as originals, whether in the brittle colors of the oils in *All for Baby* or the monochrome palette that dominates *Coral*. The implausible visions in Trute's art are utterly persuasive. With strong paintings like hers, we take leaps of faith. The pleasure is in the suspension of logic, the exercise of our imaginations. So many of the works in "Pure Painting 3" coax us to have this kind of experience in a way that only paintings can.